Towards Christian unity

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I. The Great Advance

"We went to the Conferences talking about the Churches; we came away talking about the Church."

—EDGAR DEWITT JONES.

Faced with the challenge of a militant paganism, the Christian Churches—collectively represented by hundreds of official delegates—in the summer of 1937 at Oxford and Edinburgh caught a new vision of the unique significance of Christian faith for the life of man, and took steps to unite their forces for a common advance in every sphere of life and work. Participating in the most widely representative and most carefully prepared-for Church Councils of modern times, 130 denominations from 50 nations and political subdivisions undertook to define the function of the Christian Church in the modern world, and then to study accurately the causes of disunity within the Church itself—with the definite purpose of curing them. One Conference met at Oxford in July to consider the bearing of the Christian gospel upon present world conditions; the other met at Edinburgh in August to consider the questions of faith and order which are obstacles to full Christian unity.

Out of these two Conferences, made possible in large part by the generosity of American men and women who believe in Christian cooperation and unity, came two outstanding results:

FIRST, the affirmation of a new sense of existing unity, underlying the main differences of creed, race and language, coupled with a declaration of basic Christian principles around which Christians in every land may rally in dealing with the major problems of our day—War and Peace, Race and Nations, Church and State, Church and Community, Church and Economics, Youth and Education;

SECOND, a practical plan for unifying the common work of the churches and putting these principles into practice: a World Council of Churches which shall, under God, represent the united thought and action of the Christian Churches of the world.

Oxford and Edinburgh were ecumenical. That is, they were inclusive, inter-racial, inter- or supra-national. That old — and to many unfamiliar — Greek word was resurrected and put back into circulation along with the idea for which it is the best symbol, an idea which no other word quite signifies, i.e., "concerning the whole inhabited world, or the whole household" of faith; embracing all races, nations, classes, all branches of the Church itself—universal.

Since the Conferences, things of great significance have taken place. In the United States the Protestant Episcopal Church has officially approached the Presbyterian Church with a proposal to achieve definite union. In England an official committee of highly representative leaders has published a reunion plan involving Quaker, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, and Anglican Churches. In nation after nation the idea of the World Council has caught the attention and fired the imagination of the Churches, and approval of the plan has been given by every major church assembly or conference that has met since summer.

Sir Walter Moberly of England, in a challenging speech at the Oxford Conference, stated that the choice before the world is three-fold. "Either the 'Crash' will occur; or the world will go Pagan; or there must be a genuine Christian revival." The first condition of such a revival is a purposeful and effective follow-up of the success achieved, in spite of staggering difficulties, at Oxford and Edinburgh. Through such a follow-up carried effectively into the life of the Churches a real advance could be made in solving what Lord Lothian of England has well described as mankind's four main problems: the

preservation of free institutions; the establishment of brotherhood through the ending of war; the reconciliation of the social ideal with individual liberty and initiative; and the spiritualization of education, literature, and art. And he, as a layman and statesman, contends for a dynamic Christianity which recognizes the need of a vital theology – "Knowledge of God and of his plan for the salvation of mankind as revealed through Jesus Christ."

II. The World Council of Churches

"If the Christian Church is to do the work in Christ's Name for which it is sent, if it is to meet the need and the hope of the World, it must find the way to heal its own divisions."

—BISHOP WILLIAM T. MANNING.

The proposal now submitted to the Churches of the world envisions a single ecumenical movement—a world-wide council continuously functioning in cooperative tasks for world Christianity. Oxford and Edinburgh united in commending to the Churches the setting-up of such a World Council to continue the work of the two Conferences and open the way for further cooperation.

This Council as proposed will function through a general assembly of representatives appointed directly by the cooperating Churches and meeting every five years. The Assembly will appoint a central committee of approximately 60 members, likewise representative of the Churches, meeting annually as executive of the general assembly. Neither the assembly nor the central committee will have "power to legislate for the Churches or to commit them to action without their consent."

The functions of the World Council of Churches, as provisionally defined, will include the following:

To carry on the work of the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements;
To make it easier for the Churches to act together;
To promote cooperation in study;
To further the growth of ecumenical consciousness in the Churches; and
To call World Conferences on specific subjects as occasion requires.

There will be two special commissions: one for study in the field of matters of doctrine; the other for the study of the responsibility of the Church in the field of action.

A preliminary meeting will be held May 9-13, 1938, in Holland for the purpose of drafting the constitution for the World Council, to be submitted to the Churches for their ratification, and in the interim to provide for the work already going on under Life and Work and Faith and Order.

A conference, held in Washington January 10th, 1938, for the selection of American delegates to the Holland meeting, reflected the intense interest of the Churches of America in the ecumenical movement. In no instance heretofore have the official delegates of so many American Churches of so wide a range of diversity acted together. The conference included the Orthodox, the Old Catholic, the Southern Baptists and Southern Presbyterians, three national groups of Lutherans, the Continuing Presbyterian Church of Canada, the Church of England in Canada, as well as the other denominations already officially united in cooperative enterprises.

It is an inspiring fact that the ten delegates were selected by three times as many denominations. No outside group or committee did the selecting. Only official delegates of denominations made the selection and they acted with unselfishness and consideration for the interests of the Christian cause as a whole. Inspiring, too, as indicating a trend toward new and larger unity, was the urgent desire of the American Orthodox and Old Catholics—Eastern and Western Catholic bodies respectively—to have representation not simply from Europe as originally planned but likewise from America.

This highly successful Washington Conference was under the jurisdiction of the American Joint Executive Committee representing both Faith and Order and Life and Work.

Proclamation of

from the OXFORD

"We are one in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. We are one in allegiance to Him as head of the Church and as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We are one in acknowledging that this allegiance takes precedence over any other allegiance that may make claims upon us."

"Our unity is of heart and spirit. We are divided in the outward forms of our life in Christ, because we understand differently His Will and His Church. We believe, however, that a deeper understanding will lead us toward a united apprehension of the truth as it is in Jesus."

"The Christian sees distinctions of race as part of God's purpose to enrich mankind with a diversity of gifts. Against racial pride or race antagonism the Church must set its face implacably as rebellion against God. Especially in its own life and worship, there can be no place for barriers because of race or color."

"The Universal Church surveying the nations of the world, in every one of which it is now planted and rooted, must pronounce a condemnation of war unqualified and unrestricted."

Christian Principles

and EDINBURGH Reports

¶ "The deification of nation, race or class, or of political or cultural ideals, is idolatry, and can only lead to increasing division and disaster."

¶ "Christians must do all in their power to promote among the nations justice and peaceful cooperation, and the means of peaceful adjustment to altering conditions."

¶ "Notwithstanding the notable efforts for peace which have been made within the Church, clergy and laity alike have not done what they ought to have done to remove the causes of war by raising their voices against attitudes and policies making for war, and have not proclaimed with boldness the Word of Truth in time of war."

¶ "As all authority is from God, the State stands under His judgment. God is Himself the source of justice, of which the State is not lord but servant. The Christian can acknowledge no ultimate authority but God; his loyalty to the State is part of his loyalty to God and must never usurp the place of that primary and only absolute loyalty."

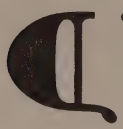
¶ "In the economic sphere the first duty of the Church is to insist that economic activities, like every other department of human life, stand under the judgment of Christ."

¶ "Christians have a double duty—both to bear witness to their faith within the existing economic order and also to test all economic institutions in the light of their understanding of God's will. The forces of evil against which Christians have to contend not only are found in the hearts of men as individuals, but have entered into and infected the structure of society and there also must be combatted. The responsibility of the Church is to insist on the true relationship of spiritual and economic goods."

¶ "The Church must claim the liberty to give a Christian education to its own children. It is in the field of education that the conflict between Christian faith and non-Christian conceptions of the ends of life, between the Church and an all-embracing community life which claims to be the source and goal of every human activity, is in many parts of the world most acute. In this conflict all is at stake, and the Church must gird itself for the struggle."

¶ "We have deeply felt the absence from our fellowship of the churches that have not been represented at the Conference. Our hearts are filled with anguish as we remember the suffering of the Church in Russia. Our sympathy and gratitude go out to our Christian brethren in Germany; we are moved to a more living trust by their steadfast witness to Christ and we pray that we may be given grace to bear the same clear witness to the Lord."

III. Bringing Oxford and Edinburgh Home



"The Lord said unto Moses 'Speak unto the people that they go forward'."

—EXODUS 14:15.

Carried home by more than 200 official delegates sent by the Churches in America to Oxford and Edinburgh, as well as by an even larger number of visitors, the ideals set forth at the Conferences have met with spontaneous response. It is impossible to list here all the evidences of this new ecumenical interest, but 207 delegates have already reported giving 2704 addresses on Oxford and Edinburgh, and they have led 288 discussion groups and made reports before 189 synods, diocesan, and other ecclesiastical bodies.

A striking example of this growing interest was the miniature Oxford-Edinburgh Conference organized in Evanston, Illinois. Each church in the community sent delegates to four weekly meetings of six "commissions" where reports were studied and findings formulated. These findings were presented and acted on at a plenary session. Four Sunday evening public meetings were also held. The undertaking was called "the most significant example of Christian cooperation in the history of Evanston."

Several county efforts have been made such as that in Bergen County, New Jersey, where 200 churches were each invited to send the pastor and five laymen to a Sunday afternoon and evening conference for the study of Oxford-Edinburgh and their meaning for the life of the County. Each delegation present undertook to set up an educational program in its local church and community.

Another great impetus has come from the religious press with its extensive publicity given to the Oxford and Edinburgh Conferences. Major articles have been carried by more than 150 periodicals.

IV. America's Share

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first and counteth the cost?"

—LUKE 14:28.

To finance this momentous undertaking, although America's share in it for this year involves no more than the budget of a single moderate-sized city church, requires the generous support of those who comprehend its significance and desire the attainment of its objectives.

Anticipating the establishment of the World Council, the American Sections of Oxford and Edinburgh have united their forces under a Joint Executive Committee and have correlated their work in a combined budget of $55,000 to be spent as indicated opposite.

In determining this combined budget, two important considerations were kept in mind: first, work already established and functioning successfully must be maintained; second, provision must be made in the united budget for new and expanding work on behalf of Christian unity. As an example of the latter, funds are needed so that the theological seminaries may give to their students a broader understanding of the Ecumenical Movement. The growing demand for this knowledge on the part of the churches and organizations throughout the United States and Canada makes necessary increased costs for printing and distribution. So numerous are the local churches in America alone that *one* personal letter to the pastor of each would cost $6,000!

The travel expenses of delegates and other expenses attendant on the provisional conference in Holland are *not* in the budget but are being cared for by individual denominations. Much invaluable service is being contributed by other organizations and by individuals so that the central budget meets only a fraction of the total expense. But that fraction constitutes the indispensable foundation on which rests the success of the whole movement.

¶ AMERICA'S SHARE in the expenses of the central offices in Europe pending the establishment of the World Council of Churches $20,000

These are the established centers of the ecumenical movement in London, Winchester and Geneva. They are charged with carrying forward throughout the world the work of the Oxford and Edinburgh Conferences and maintaining research and educational activity in the fields of ecumenical cooperation and unity.

¶ AMERICAN SECTION of the World Conference on Faith and Order 11,900

This involves the promotion of study and of conferences devoted to the carrying out of recommendations of the Edinburgh Conference, including the preparations for the World Council of Churches.

¶ AMERICAN SECTION of the Universal Christian Council 23,109

This includes the continuation of the present responsibilities of the Section, which serves also as the Federal Council's Department of Relations with Churches Abroad, and the carrying out of the recommendations of the Oxford Conference with particular reference to the World Council plans.

TOTAL..... $55,009

Generous men and women who believed in Christian cooperation and Christian unity made Oxford and Edinburgh a reality. The same generosity and support are needed now to translate the ideals and hopes and plans of those two memorable meetings into a program of vigorous and effective action.

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Towards CHRISTIAN UNITY

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